

# 6 The Soul Guide Discourse

## A Mirror to the Soul



Figure 6.1 The Soul Guide Coaching Discourse (original artwork by Maia Kirchkheli)

**Introduction****Mirror to the soul: coaching the inner self****Spirituality and coaching****The soul at work: humanity, ethics and workplace spirituality****Health warning!****Coaching as a new confessional space****Conclusion****Suggested reading****Introduction**

We arrive at truth, not by reason only, but also by the heart. (Extract from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, 1670, published posthumously)

The term 'Soul Guide' indicates coaching that transcends the rational and material – it enables a playfulness to explore deep human experience in the unique space created by the coaching pair. The coach holds a 'mirror to the soul' creating a reflective, contemplative space that opens up the realm of wisdom rather than knowledge, being rather than doing, and ultimately is part of the human search for truth, meaning, authenticity and love. The Soul Guide Discourse comes from the past (Soul Healers in different guises) and yet is the most contemporary approach, taking coaching beyond the discourses of modernity (Psy Expert and Managerial Discourses) and into the post-modern realm. Soul Guide Coaching offers a counter-cultural point that claims a different territory, another possibility: beyond the dash to become modern, efficient and productive, beyond 'homo-economicus' and also beyond the therapeutic, whereby the client becomes 'a patient' or a client with a problem. The Soul Guide Discourse represents the aspect of coaching that has emerged from other 'Soul Healers' over the centuries, those in socially sanctioned roles who have worked with the interior aspects of the self – meaning, emotions, identity, the unconscious, the conscience, the human spirit, values and beliefs, existentialism, how to live, how to face loss and ultimately how to face death. Of all the coaching discourses it has the longest continuity and is therefore of special importance.

The soul space is indefinable, yet is accessible through one's experience. Soul Guide Coaching works in this experiential space. The word 'soul' itself is problematic; naming this discourse the Soul Guide is knowingly to risk misunderstandings. Each person will project onto this term their own passions,



prejudices and perceptions. To some it evokes a particular religious or spiritual meaning, to others a secular reference to our deep humanity. Soul Guide Coaching enables engagement with these, while how the 'soul' is explored depends on the coach's stance and experience, and the coachee's beliefs and life experiences.

Soul music is a good analogy for this work: music that touches our souls, that comes from spiritual/religious/cultural roots (African American Gospel music), but has merged with many other musical sources. Soul music is not necessarily spiritual, but can certainly touch our spirit. The same is true for Soul Guide Coaching. Let me be clear: the Soul Guide Discourse is not limited to the religious and spiritual; it encompasses secularism, humanism, existentialism, phenomenology, theology and many other ways of exploring the inner self. Essentially this book follows Socrates and Plato to whom the soul was the essence of the person.

Soul Guide Coaching at its best focuses on the inner self, free from utilitarian goals and outcomes. At its worse Soul Guide Coaching uses this approach as an instrumental device to attain high performance performativity. Spirituality, humanity and soul work are then utilized as an instrument or tool towards purely productive performative ends. Surprisingly when these links are made in the coaching literature, rarely are ethical questions asked.

Nancy Kline, author of *Time to Think* (1999), works from within this tradition, whereby her focus on silence and creating a space, rather than chasing goals from the outset, is refreshing. Kline is not explicitly spiritual in her approach but her work is influenced and resonates with her Quaker background, and promotes a thinking environment that comes from the capacity to not rush into action. From an analytic discourse perspective this emerges from religious contemplative traditions.

### What happens in the silence? The real art of coaching

'Must we speak?

And if we do, what might we destroy?

How can we know?'

Out of a particular silence comes clear thinking – choice, courage, change. (BACP, 2011)

Soul Guide Coaching is not confined to specific approaches – its discourse is alive and continually present within coaching; yet it often goes un-named, unnoticed or happens in a covert way. Coaches advertise and work in the domain of an Executive Coach; however, they often find themselves doing 'soul work' with their coachee.



Bachkirova (2011) has a chapter entitled 'Coaching the soul' where she explains that this is coaching in relation to the spiritual in its broadest sense focusing on three groups:

- 1 Potential clients who demonstrate capacities beyond those available to individuals with unformed, formed and reformed ego ... this group can include people who are called mystics and sages ... who can bring their organisms on a regular basis to an unusual state of 'no-self'...
- 2 Clients who have unusual (spiritual/mystical) experiences and wish to integrate these experiences ...
- 3 Clients who have a deep interest in the spiritual ...

Bachkirova writes that 80 per cent of the world's population fit into the third category which is why coaching the soul is an important if not an easy subject. I take a broader view that Soul Guide Coaching transcends those who claim no-self, or have unusual spiritual experiences or who have a deep interest in the spiritual. Soul Guide Coaching is a place of refuge from materialism, from instrumentalism; the soul can speak from diverse, unexpected places, connecting our deep humanity that may be described in spiritual terms or in purely human emotional terms. As Deleuze expresses below, even the non-spiritual have souls, just not the archetypal religious/psychological soul we are accustomed to thinking about. Gilles Deleuze claims that the soul is found in a discontinuous surface, a multiplicity of spaces, relations and divisions that are established through a kind of in-folding of exteriority, rather than existing in a psychological system that lies deep within us (Deleuze, 1988: 94–123).

The Soul Guide coach works with a person's experience, and Deleuze's description is helpful in clarifying that whilst the coach works with the inner self, this is not separate from the external, from the 'in-folding of exteriority'. Many coaches work on the premise that within us there is a whole authentic person, a soul to be found, yet as Deleuze says, the soul is found in a 'multiplicity of spaces'. One of these places however is often conceptualized by the coach and coachee as the 'inner self'.

## Mirror to the Soul: Coaching the Inner Self

### Epiphany, revelation and love: coaching beyond Homo-economicus

The Soul Guide coaches from a place of 'not-knowing', coaching with an openness that allows soul-coaching to take place. This is not about 'therapizing' a coachee; the coach is not looking for unconscious defences or to regress the



coachee. However, it is possible to harness the brilliance of Freud, and work with an applied form in a coaching setting that uses the methods of psychoanalysis for a coaching approach that develops an 'associative intelligence' in the coaches and their coachees (this is discussed in Chapter 13 on coaching education).

If coaches learn how to use free association and paternal and maternal containment working with counter-transference and interpretations, then the coach has a working methodology and theoretical base for coaching in the Soul Guide Discourse from an unconscious perspective. This approach differs radically from the Psy Expert approach that focuses on behavioural change rather than a depth analysis that works with the unconscious, existential, deeply human and spiritual concerns using non-directive, non-technique-driven approaches. The outcomes are not to create a more productive employee, but to help the coachee '*locate themselves*', to discover their inner and authentic self, which means facing the demons as well as discovering their hidden talents. By discovering themselves in depth, the coachee creates a solid ethical and values base to work from and thereby becomes more grounded and works from a place of grounded authenticity.

### The unconscious, the soul and the existential self

Coaching in this open-ended way allows both the unconscious and the soul to come to life in the coaching room. Bettelheim's book *Freud and Man's Soul* discusses how American psychology has become all analysis, to the complete neglect of the psyche or soul (1982: 19).

Let us recall Freud's edict, 'Where Id was there Ego shall be', meaning the task was to make the unconscious more conscious, allowing individuals to liberate themselves. If we follow Bettelheim (1982) and recover the soul work, a coachee can become more aware and able to shape their future selves. Other approaches to Soul Guide Coaching come from philosophical, humanist and theological approaches, a diversity which is welcomed, for example in Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of 'good faith' and 'bad faith' (Sartre, 2001). This can be very helpful in explorations regarding life's meaning, how it is lived and how we make choices. These are central to the coaching work of the Soul Guide.

This coaching stance opens a space to explore the essence of the self – the existential self, the meaning of lives, angst and joy, fear and frailty, hopes and desires, freedom and confinement, values and meaning.

To coach as a Soul Guide means to work within a cultural and unconscious symbolic order. Working in the space of Soul Guide can take place within any coaching approach, although it is less common in business coaching which focuses more on role and output, and delves less into the deeper inner-work of the Soul Guide coach. Executive and Leadership coaching can set out on a path of goal-focused pragmatism, but in my experience, Soul Guide Coaching very often emerges in an unplanned way and becomes central to the coaching work.



### Life-coaching and transpersonal coaching

Life-coaching and transpersonal coaching are the clearest coaching areas in which the Soul Guide Discourse is seen. The website statement below captures the Life-coaching stance that works in the Soul Guide Discourse. It clearly states that spirituality is about 'inner-fulfillment and your true desires', and separates itself from institutional religion.

*How can Life-coaching help me to explore my spirituality?*

A Life-coach may help individuals to:

- Establish their inner dreams and goals
- Explore what is really important in their life
- Develop a relationship with their inner self
- Identify any obstacles in their way and find out how to overcome these
- Grow spiritually
- Live in accordance with their beliefs and inner values
- Learn to live in peace and acceptance
- Gain a deeper understanding of where they are now and where they want to be. (Life Coach Directory, 2011)

Transpersonal coaching focuses on personal development that transcends psychological and emotional form and applies transpersonal psychology (also applied to therapy) to coaching:

... it is devoted to the idea of development, and holds that we are all on a path of psycho-spiritual development whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not [Wilber, 2000]. (Rowan, 2010: 148)

Stephanie Sparrow writing in *Personnel Today* cites John Whitmore (2002), a leading proponent of transpersonal coaching:

Transpersonal coaching is useful for coachees who need more than just a framework (such as the GROW model) for a coaching conversation. ... 'They may wish to explore existential or spiritual issues, and this is where transpersonal coaching can be helpful. They may feel something is missing in their life but they are unsure what it is.' (Sparrow, 2007)

The Soul Guide Discourse is represented clearly within this tradition.



## Spirituality and Coaching

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If a coach explicitly states they are working within the realm of spirituality, this adds a further dimension. Spirituality is a confused category and very difficult to define. It carries meanings that are socially constructed (Gergen, 2001). For some, spirituality may signify a fluffy west-coast idealism or it might be more threatening – ‘Is this person looking into my soul?’, ‘Do they have mystical powers?’, ‘Are they whackos?’ Spirituality may also remind individuals of experiences they have had in religious institutions where they experienced powerful transformative experiences or, conversely, they may feel coerced where power has been abused.

Spirituality remains a contested term (see Box 6.1).

### Box 6.1 Spirituality

The term ‘spiritual’ needs to be problematized and critiqued in order to help make sense of it, as it is not a clearly defined or agreed term. ‘Spirituality’ is an especially challenging term when used in the context of the secular workplace.

When spirituality is discussed outside of specific spiritual contexts such as different faith communities or religions it becomes challenging because there is not a shared language or normative assumptions to express and define it.

Good secular leadership practice involves ethics, humanistic compassion and creativity, so what differentiates spirituality in leadership? Mitroff and Denton claim that spirituality is interconnectedness:

If one word best captures the meaning of spirituality and the vital role it plays in people’s lives, it is ‘interconnectedness’. (Mitroff and Denton, 1999: xvi)

But if it is interconnectedness, how does spirituality differentiate itself from systems theory – biology, network theory and eco-systems? Zohar and Marshall describe spiritual intelligence (SQ) as ‘the intelligence with which we access our deepest meanings, values, purposes and highest emotions’. They write:

In understanding SQ and Spiritual Leadership it is important to list the twelve transformative processes of SQ: Self-awareness, Spontaneity, Vision and Value led, Holistic, Compassion (feeling with), Celebration of diversity, Field-independence, Asking why?, Reframe, Positive use of adversity, Humility, Sense of vocation. (Zohar and Marshall, 2011: 78)

*(Continued)*



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It can be argued that not one of these 12 processes could be separated from the characteristics of a leader with a value-based, humanistic stance. This begs the question, what separates the spiritual leader from an ethical 'good' leader? Being religious or spiritual doesn't always lead to positive outcomes as many a spiritual leader has failed owing to their immoral and unethical acts.

Kierkegaard claimed that the ethical and spiritual are closely connected but not the same. One can be ethical without being religious or spiritual. However, one cannot be spiritual or religious without some commitment and relationship to the divine source or God.

Spirituality is easily then confused with ethics and morality that many non-spiritual people share. Spirituality hopefully leads us to act upon these values 'by their fruits ye shall know them' (this can apply to all spirituality beyond the Christian realm) but this doesn't mean that these values are in themselves spiritual. Conversely the opposite can also be true – spirituality as a tool at work can also lead us into further narcissism:

Zohar and Marshall use the term Spiritual Intelligence. ... Spirituality paradoxically becomes linked to cognitive intelligence and rationality. ... I was listening to a leadership lecture recently on spiritual development for business leaders, where participants were offered 'executive yoga' in the morning and 'executive meditation' in the evening. I wondered how 'executive yoga' differs from 'yoga'. The paradox is that these techniques are supposed to move leaders away from narcissism and ego, and yet making yoga and meditation 'executive' attempts to make it elite in some way, for the 'special executive'. (Western, 2008a: 179)

Spirituality is differentiated from institutional religion by some people, but the categories are not so clear and further language needs to be used to separate them (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

Spirituality signifies something of immanence, transcendence and mythos, as opposed to secularism which is signified by science, rationality, materiality and logos. Spirituality can be inclusive of the latter, but cannot exist without signifying in some way the divine that transcends time and the material world.

It is important to hold these complexities in mind when considering spirituality and coaching. Taking a spiritual stance, the coach needs to be aware that they will stimulate powerful positive and negative transferences and unconscious projections from their coachees. These projections are not about the person, but about the person-in-role: *'my spiritual coach'* who can take on the primitive desires we either want to be saved from, or we unconsciously desire; i.e. a perfect caring mother: *'She's amazing ... so insightful, and such a good person, it's like she can read my soul.'*



A coach, like a therapist, can be seen as a secular form of the priesthood, and a coach who acknowledges their spirituality moves closer to this idea of the secular priest. There are far too many examples of priests, pastors, therapists and coaches who fall from grace when they become seduced by idealized projections and transferences. Therapists are highly trained and supervised to increase their capacity to be self-knowing while priests work in institutional settings that provide some containment and safety for them.

Coaches are much less well protected. The training and self-work is much more limited than therapy and they work in a more informal setting with a less rigorous division of roles (coaches may go to dinner with clients whereas therapists don't). Supervision is also limited in coaching.

When a coachee seeks a 'spiritual coach' they bring with them a set of expectations and perceptions both about themselves and about the coach. Taking a critical view of spiritual coaching is therefore vital in order to safeguard and learn from this important practice as there are too many examples of spirituality and power being abused or misused.

Coaching from a spiritual place can overlap with secular coaching from a deep ethical and humanist space. Table 6.1 (Western and Sedgmore, 2008) shows a coaching framework that can be interpreted from a spiritual or secular place. This may also be a useful framework for pastoral care, pastoral counselling and for spiritual directors, as well as Soul Guide coaches.

## The Soul at Work: Humanity, Ethics and Workplace Spirituality

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This section examines the Soul at work, taking an ethical perspective and critiquing how organizations, theorists and managers can utilize the soul, spirituality, subjectivity, emotions and identity in explicit and subtle 'coercive' ways to increase productivity and profit, at the expense of authentic human development. Reviewing this work with coaching in mind, there is an important 'health warning' for coaches, that is, to refrain from being seduced to partake in coaching that espouses 'soul' or depth work, yet in practice is helping to produce what Casey refers to as 'designer employees' with a 'capitulated sense of self' (Casey, 1995).

### Soul hierarchies

Alan Seiler (2005) promotes soul work and writes in *Coaching to the Human Soul* (Vol. 1):



The concept of soul can sound elusive and esoteric, either a religious notion or a 'touchy feely' concept that is unrelated to the practicalities of everyday living and the functioning of organisations. To take this approach closes off a dimension, and a higher order, of learning that is relevant to both personal and organisational learning. (Seiler, 2005: 10–11)

**Table 6.1 A secular and spiritual coaching framework**

Secular		Spiritual
Silence. Reflection. Free association. Stream of consciousness.	<b>Thinking space</b>	Silent contemplation. Meditation. Prayer. Grace – opening to the divine.
Pairing with coach – bringing hope through the birth of new ideas. Recognizing strengths and achievements. Holding the space when painful and anxiety provoking. Future focused. Finding exceptions to problems. A humanistic optimism.	<b>Hope</b>	Pairing with coach – pairing with the divine, bringing hope through engaging the spirit. Recognizing charism – God's gift to each of us. Holding the space when in 'the dark night of the soul', offering spiritual hope! Accessing the good news of different religious/spiritual teachings. A faith in a better future.
Playing with ideas. Fun – art – creativity. Getting in touch with the unconscious and the body.	<b>Imagination</b>	Engaging with the infinite creativity of the divine. Tapping into one's spiritual nature and source.
Connectivity across boundaries, building relationships, stakeholders' awareness.	<b>Network</b>	Connectivity of all things. Divine or cosmic unity and holism. Deep ecology. Finding God in and through relations with others.
Identifying who to speak to next. The move from thinking to action. Application of coaching process to the workplace.	<b>Knowledge exchange</b>	Finding the truth through listening to others and to the divine. Moving from contemplation to action. Application of coaching to 'spiritual life', ethical behaviour and social justice.

Seiler talks about higher order of learning, following Maslow (1976), Wilber (2000), Torbert (1993) and Beck and Cowan (1996), who tend to insert hierarchic stages into their popular 'theories', stages such as spiral dynamics and integral psychology. The popular interest in Wilber's and Beck and Cowan's work has its critics, who write that whilst the theories claim inclusivity, they can be seen as socially elitist and authoritarian. In his spiral dynamic theory Beck characterizes developmental tiers for individuals, and suggests that 'Spiral Wizards' have the capacity to make superior decisions and manufacture consent at lower levels. This rhetoric of tiers, levels and wizards reflects the hierarchical nature and worryingly the 'magical' qualities of these special people. This language feeds narcissistic personalities with big egos who can easily misuse spirituality in the workplace.



## Spirituality and profit

The notion of the soul is connected to enduring organisational concerns of performance, productivity, organisational success and competitive advantage. (Seiler, 2005: 11)

There is a distinct lack of critical thinking in this domain. To develop spiritual/human awareness in whatever form is usually related to states of humility, the loss or overcoming of ego-states, and is certainly non-materialistic according to the great philosophical and religious teachings. When Seiler links the soul to gaining productivity the warning bells sound.

The links between spirituality and profit are clearly separated by John Whitmore, who sees that people want more in their lives. Spirituality and religion have both always promoted social justice, but at the same time they can act in a coercive way.

Case and Gosling discuss the instrumentality of spirituality at depth in their excellent article 'The spiritual organisation: critical reflections on the instrumentality of workplace spirituality' (Case and Gosling, 2010). They trace how religion/spirituality and work focus on the task of improving employee's working conditions:

... the relationship between the organization of work, religion and spiritual life is hardly new to social science. Indeed, analysis of this relationship is foundational to the social theorizing of Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Freud in considering the emergence of Methodist, Calvinist and Quaker corporations during the Industrial Revolution. (Case and Gosling, 2010: 258)

However, religion and work were never a straightforward altruistic act. Religious morality inspired positive changes that were influential in humanizing the workplace, but they also carried an ideology that underpinned a paternalism that accompanies the philanthropy. For example, the Quakers made exceptional progress in workplace conditions but this was also aligned to profit and to imposing their Quaker morality:

What convinced Quaker magnates of their approach, however, was not so much the moral strength of their position but its commercial results: managing the labour force decently was good for business. (Walvin, 1997: 183)

Walvin continues:

The Quaker magnates tried to maintain a distinct moral tone at work. ... The Rowntree family insisted on decorous behaviour to and from the factory ... recruited workers from 'respectable homes' ... and refused to



employ married women in the belief that they should care for hearth and home; single mothers were never employed. (1997: 191)

Walvin concedes however that:

it is not to diminish the motives or achievements of Rowntree, Cadbury or other industrial philanthropists to suggest that their pioneering welfare projects should in fact be judged as contributions to [a] new style of industrial management, rather than as exercises in Quaker inspired benevolence. (1997: 190–191)

The links between workplace and spirituality have always been multilayered with multiple agendas, some designed to harness the soul to maximize profit, others to offer employees opportunities to be fully themselves at work, and sometimes both.

There is now a renewed interest in workplace spirituality, which is influenced by 'New Age spirituality' and the 'unchurched' movement (Wexler, 1996; Bell and Taylor, 2003; Heelas, 2008), whereby spirituality is taken out of religious institutional settings, and becomes personalized and immanent rather than transcendent. Workplace spirituality follows the 'turn to subjectivity' (Woodhead, 2004) and the shift from manual labour to cognitive labour. Utilizing the subjective and cognitive self at work means engaging with emotions and the identity. Employees are expected to bring their whole person to work, and this inevitably leads to the interest in workplace spirituality.

Whyte indicated this trend as early as 1956 when writing about the new 'organization man':

No one wants to see the old authoritarian return, but at least it could be said of him that what he wanted primarily of you was your sweat. The new man wants your soul. (1956: 365)

Emotions and identity, and the spirit/soul, are now harnessed for the purpose of ever greater productivity. Popular publications in this field include:

Barrett (1998) *Liberating the Corporate Soul*, Conger (1994) *The Spirit at Work*, Howard and Welbourn (2004) *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon*, Jones (1996) *Jesus, CEO*, Klein and Izzo (1999) *Awakening Corporate Soul*, Lodahl and Powell (1999) *Embodied Holiness: A Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth ...* (Case and Gosling, 2010: 277)



## Bringing the whole self to work

Humanists, diversity and inclusion experts, and spiritual and faith leaders, talk about bringing the 'whole self to work', claiming this to be a good thing. This allows someone to bring their sexuality, their faith and their 'whole person' to work, creating a better environment for them and for the company, the idea being that if the employee can be 'whole' they will feel happier, and also be more engaged and therefore more productive for the company. The individual, society and the company then benefit.

This 'holistic' approach is commonly regarded as part of the coaching territory. Coaches can help an individual integrate themselves to the company values. On the flip side, it is argued that this 'bringing the whole self to work' is a colonization of the self by the company, which wants your soul purely to increase productivity and profit. Tourish and Tourish (2010) argue that:

... the workplace is not a useful medium for people to find the deepest meaning in their lives ... [l]eaders of business organisations are not spiritual engineers or secular priests, charged with responsibility for the human soul, and business organisations are not a suitable forum for exploring such issues. (Tourish and Tourish, 2010: 219)

## Health Warning!

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There are dangers that management techniques attempt to create organizational cultures that harness the employee's 'soul' to the company in order to maximize productivity. Coaching then can become a 'tool' to help achieve this. Messiah Leadership (see Western, 2008a) explicitly attempts to engineer strong cultures by setting out visions and values that followers identify with in order to foster a tight cult-like company culture that 'frees' employees to act (Kunda, 1992; Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). Collins and Porras, in their best seller *Built to Last* (2000), claim that 'the most difference in having an enduringly great company was the greatness of the leader'. In their chapter titled 'Cult-like cultures' they write:

In short, understanding that cult-like tightness around an ideology actually enables a company to turn people loose to experimental change, adapt and – above all – act. (2000: 123)

Peters and Waterman in their bestselling book *In search of Excellence* describe excellent companies with strong cultures as:



Fanatic centralists around core value ... yet as one analyst argues, 'the brainwashed members of an extreme political sect are no more conformist in their central beliefs'. (1982: 15–16)

These authors praise 'cult-like' totalizing cultures that may score high on employment engagement surveys, but they also prohibit dissent and promote uncompromising conformity.

Sometimes these leadership styles and cultures refer explicitly to spirituality and the soul, and at other times it's implicit. Much of the transformational leadership literature (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1998) links goodness, authenticity and self-actualization to leadership without specifically referring to spirituality (Bass, 1998: 171).

Yet as Grint points out, this leadership carries in its language images of prophetic religious leaders:

During the 1980s, charismatic leadership returned with a vengeance, complete with all the accoutrements of biblical charismatics including visions missions and zealot like disciples. (Grint, 1997: 13–14)

In this scenario, coaching drawing on soul work shapes the self to the demands of the organizational culture. The coach is working on an agenda to colonize the self to fit the company. A false self is created, a performative, purely productive self that 'performs to the norms' in order to keep job and career on track. Coaches working in this area then become a part of the socialization process, using the language of liberation but working unthinkingly towards a process of domination.

Coaching then can become a part of the management apparatus to colonize the soul. There is a big drive in corporations to align personal and organizational values, which has the obvious danger of creating homogenized and totalizing workplaces. Coaching around company values, behaviours and leadership competencies needs to develop robust critical insights in order to resist being used to create conformist cultures.

### In defence of Soul Guide Coaching

Having critiqued workplace spirituality and the use of culture control in organizations, there is something vital and intrinsic to our humanity, identity and experience that is closed off if we ignore this Soul Guide Coaching Discourse in the workplace. Without Soul Guide Discourse, coaching becomes purely a materialistic process focusing on efficiency, performance and productivity.



To coach in the Soul Guide domain it is important to be aware of the dangers. If you are coaching on performance, choose your approach! Move away from Soul Guide Coaching and into the Psy Expert Discourse; do not contaminate or bastardize the work with the soul! This is not to compartmentalize, but to allow soul work to take place without reducing it to utilitarianism or economic gain.

Having set out the critical position and the dangers, the next section will express how Soul Guide Coaching can be beneficial and how the coach works within this discourse.

### Locating ourselves: a Soul Guide Coaching exercise

In my work as an executive and leadership coach I experience coachees from diverse backgrounds, many of whom feel dislocated. I share this 'counter-transference' with them, this generic state of displacement. Many coachees respond immediately as it speaks to their emotional condition; they are not desperately lost, nor are they necessarily very unsettled, alienated or disorientated, yet they don't feel located or grounded. They are displaced, they don't know their place, they do not have a place. They feel ungrounded and dislocated from place. The coaching work here is to 'locate the self'. One coaching exercise I do is called 'Locating Ourselves' where I take coachees to an art museum, usually the Tate Modern, and offer them a series of questions as they wander the vast space of the Turbine Hall, and then associate with the artwork in the gallery (see Box 6.2).

#### Box 6.2 Locating Ourselves: Coaching Exercise in Art Gallery

You have one hour to wander the gallery, with the objective of using the art and the space to reflect on how you locate yourself in the world of work. To locate ourselves means different things to different people as it raises questions of identity, of perception, of hope and aspiration, and of family and cultural inscriptions upon our bodies and thoughts.

#### Questions to reflect on as you wander, look and experience

- Who are you?
- What is your place?

*(Continued)*



*(Continued)*

- Where are you from?
- Where is your home?
- Who are your people/community?
- How does work define and relate to your identity?
- How much do you estimate, as a percentage, your identity is defined by your work/profession?
- How does technology play a part in constructing who you are, as a professional and as a person?
- (As you wander the gallery jot down notes in relation to the art and its impact on you.)

#### **Probing questions for reflection**

- What makes you feel 'located' and grounded?
- What dislocates you and makes you feel fragmented or alienated?
- (When looking at the artwork and also at the space, try to be open and responsive to what emerges.)
- What thoughts are triggered?
- What pictures/art do you distance yourself from and walk away – why?
- What feelings does the art work stir? What memories? What shadows?
- What associations?
- What is your body saying?
- What connections are you making?
- What are you left curious about?
- What are you left preoccupied by?

We work on who they are and what their place is. The aim of this work is to locate the coachees in a material world, to develop an associative intelligence, and to help them develop an ethical self.

Gary Snyder writes:

... place, and the scale of space, must be measured against our bodies and their capabilities ... to know that it takes six months to walk across Turtle Island is to get some grasp of the distance. (1990: 105)

To be located is to find our place – geographically, in our family, at work, in kinship groups, in community, in faith, in ourselves. Finding our place and locating ourselves as individuals and collective groups is, in my experience, one of the greatest challenges of our times, and Soul Guide Coaching



provides the space to do some of this very important work. The flexibility of relocating the coaching pair from a desk to a virtual place, or to an art gallery, is an example of how coaching can usurp the more static/modernist therapeutic approaches. In this emergent space, coachees are achieving different insights and transformations through unexpected ways, without focusing on goals. An authentic self is explored, and the results are powerful. I coached a senior leader in the banking sector working in a new international regional role: our work began in the Managerial and Network Coach Discourse, focusing on role and how to influence change in a large geographical network, but soon we found ourselves in the Soul Guide Discourse, working on his inner self; so I took him to the Tate to do the locating exercise, which completely opened up new perspectives and allowed a new exploration of his work/life.

Coaching beyond function and utility is what Soul Guide Coaching is; yet at the same time, as the above shows, the executive makes important links to their work. But measuring this empirically would be very problematic, and I would argue a waste of resources. Qualitative research, however, might be very useful.

## Coaching as a New Confessional Space

Western man has become a confessing animal. (Foucault, 1978: 59)

I will now turn to how the confessional links to the Soul Guide Discourse, claiming that coaching is the post-modern confessional. This does not refer to a sinner–priest relationship, as the confessional has been transformed into a space that allows a multiplicity of confessions, of desire as well as sin, as a place where the coachee can confess and at the same time discover our doubts, anxieties and preoccupations, and in doing so discover and explore our authenticity and the making of the self.

Confession is deep rooted in the Western cultural psyche, and has taken on new populist forms in the past two decades. Coachees find themselves often unwittingly confessing their desire and/or anxieties to a coach, even when the coach may be contracted to do performance-focused work. This is somewhat true in mentoring relationships as well, although the external coach offers a more confidential and specific context for the confessional to take place. The coach has the option (if trained and able) to take up the role of Soul Guide, to stay with the coachee on this journey.

Modern and post-modern society stimulates the desire for confession, to tell ‘the other’ about our desires and fears, to disclose our secrets. We confess





**Figure 6.2** Confession box, Krakow, Poland (photograph taken by author, 2011)

privately and publicly to friends and to TV cameras. The talk show became a vital instrument of confession:

Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer ... and all their imitators were evangelists of the talking cure who believed that secrets are a slow-working poison to the soul, and that confessing them in a public forum has a healing effect. ... Whatever their motives for appearing they acquiesced to the idea that disclosing to a national audience their misdeeds and emotional afflictions would cleanse their soul. (Cobb, 2005: 255)



Confessing in the popular media, in magazines, TV radio talk shows, and also in 'high' culture too, autobiographies are filled with confessional stories. Confession can be liberating for two reasons: firstly because it unburdens an individual, and secondly because of the symbolic meaning of the confession – within it resides a redemptive promise 'to be forgiven'.

Coaching is inscribed by contemporary culture and produces a new confessional space for the coaching pair. To coach as a Soul Guide is to listen to the confessions of the coachee, to hear their hidden desires, fears, angst and anxieties.

The new coaching confessional is a conversational place freed from the baggage of having to achieve goals, regressive reflection or unnecessary guilt. It is ultimately where *human* meets *human* in the coaching relationship, replacing a more transactional engagement where *technocrat* meets *employee*.

Confession can have negative connotations of being sinful or of being judged. However, in contemporary society, it transcends this perspective and the confessional becomes also a place of discovery, a place where the self-examination takes place in an open way; where our shadow side is revealed, where insights and revelation take place.

### The confessional journey

In a coaching session, the confessional discourse takes on meaning with wider and more constructive outcomes than a religious or psychotherapeutic 'confession' because of the different parameters at work. Under religious confession the penitent (the modern day coachee) undergoes self-examination and confesses sins (deeds and thoughts) to the priest who is authorized on behalf of the Church and God to give absolution and penitence.

Foucault wrote that psychoanalysis was the inheritor of the religious confessional (Foucault, 1978), while in psychotherapy, the secular priest (analyst, therapist or counsellor) holds a socially sanctioned ritual where the client undergoes a self-examination, revealing their interior selves. 'Bad' deeds and hidden and forbidden thoughts are spoken in therapy that aren't spoken elsewhere: *'I cheated on my wife and feel really guilty [or don't feel any guilt]'*, *'I have a fantasy about sleeping with other men'*, *'I hate my home life but my partner thinks we are getting on fine and wants to get married.'* Therapy offers psychic and emotional reparation in place of the religious absolution.

Coaching now provides a new privatized space for the confessional to occur. Foucault recanted his earlier work on confession where he realized that confession could work without the repressive hypothesis, i.e. confession went beyond governance, domination and control (Foucault, 1980; Butler,



1990: 164). Confession had another aspect whereby the confessant could 'constitute a truth of oneself':

... the self constitutes itself through discourse with the assistance of another's presence and speech ... the point is not to ferret out desires and expose the truth in public, but rather to constitute a truth of oneself through the act of verbalization itself. (Butler, 1990: 163)

### A particular 'speech act' – the making of the self

The act of coming to a coach is to make a particular kind of 'speech act'. Verbalizing one's inner thoughts to a professional confidential listener, a socially sanctioned witness (the coach) changes conversation into another form of speech that acts upon us in a different way. Just speaking in this context is itself an act of transformation. Speaking in a coaching session is to speak oneself into existence. The speaker is also the listener. The coachee often doesn't know what is going to be said until it is spoken, and can be surprised by the content as if listening to another person speak. The transformation happens when thoughts are materialized into sounds and words made by the throat, voice and tongue, so that the witness and the speaker physically hear what they say. In this way the coachee materializes themselves; and they discover and produce themselves through this 'speech act'.

To achieve this, a confessional site is required, with a speaker and a listener/witness (a credible socially sanctioned person), and the best site is one that is freed from a repressive (religious) or pathologizing (psychotherapeutic) hypothesis. In coaching, the coachee is more in control of their confession and also of their redemption and reparation. They are not forgiven by a religious or secular priest, as the coach doesn't inherit the same level of symbolic power as the priest or the psychoanalyst whose words carry a sacramental power, supported by ritualistic form. The coach and coachee collaborate to work on the reparation; some of it happens through the act of confession, sometimes through acts outside the session. Sometimes the reparation is based simply on insight, and has nothing at all to do with sinning.

### Private and public confession

We have become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide ... the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. (Foucault, 1978: 59)



The religious confessional began as a public act before becoming a private act, taking place for centuries in the religious confessional booth. By becoming a private act, taking place between the new powerful dyad – penitent and priest – it paradoxically became increasingly powerful as a social form of control in England. In the twelfth century a law was passed making confession obligatory. Foucault writes how this had the impact of re-enforcing individuality.

The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power. (Foucault, 1978: 59)

The impact of the private confessional helped produce the new modern subject – the reflective, individualized self, who internalized a ‘Big Other’ (God). This ensured that each individual examined their conscience, developing a strong super-ego and conscience, self-policing and monitoring their behaviour and thoughts.

The reflective, individuated thinking we take for granted today in the West was not always the case (nor is it universal, though becoming more so with the expansion of capitalism and modernity). When the modern person confesses their sinful and desirous selves to a professional confidant(e) (counsellor, priest, coach) many argue that this reinforces a privatized, capitalist, individualized and atomized society (Putnam, 2000; Furedi, 2003). Yet in the past two decades the confessional has become once again a public event, a spectacle for the masses, a form of entertainment. The confessional has permeated the social in such a way that there is a social compulsion to confess, both privately and publicly, and a huge desire to be a confessional voyeur. Perhaps it is because we learn about ourselves through other people’s struggles and perhaps there is an element of sadism, where people enjoy observing another’s pain.

Oprah specializes in star confessions, and she leads from the front.

Oprah confesses that she’s fallen off the weight loss wagon. The medical and emotional issues that contributed to her weight gain. Plus, how she’s getting back on track with the help of Bob Greene and making a commitment to live her best life .... (Oprah Winfrey Online, 2011)

Jackee Holder, a Life-coach, follows this pattern and writes on her website:

Like many of the clients I see, behind the scenes of my public life there was a whole other drama. There was a huge secret that I carried. What you saw on the outside wasn’t always reflected on the inside. ... From the outside looking in, you wouldn’t have known that



I was often living a life that was in chaos. Sometimes barely meeting my bill payments, procrastinating on things that would help my business, managing my time ineffectively and so it went on. (Holder, 2011)

She then shows the path to redemption:

Along the way I learned how important it was to practice self-care, to nurture my creativity, which is so often the source of my productivity.

Celebrities such as Ricky Martin, 'who confesses that for most of his life he faced an inner struggle', are invited onto Oprah shows to confess their inner struggles, and be it sexuality, drink and/or drugs, they come to Oprah and to publicly confess, to tell all. The masses love to identify with the emoting star, who receives huge fees to publicly cry, to show remorse and then to disclose how they have overcome their struggle, to wild audience whooping and applause.

At another level, Jerry Springer shows us how the spectacle of the public confession replaces the past fetish of the public hanging; poor and marginalized people come on to confess their sins before a baying crowd. Publicly confessing seems to achieve three things:

- It makes the immortal mortal, bringing the celebrity into our own world of messy emotions.
- It rehabilitates the star – they make public reparation and in return regain the public adoration.
- 15 minutes of fame – it creates a celebrity status for individuals who are marginalized outcasts.

The desire for the confessional seems insatiable in today's society.

### **Forgiveness, absolution and penitence**

To be absolved, the Catholic Church teaches that the religious penitent should:

- 1 Be contrite (feel sorry)
- 2 Confess (speak the deed/thought)
- 3 Offer penance (put right – by prayer or deed)

The coaching version of the confession also offers a space where these three conditions apply, and the path to redemption is followed through offering penance by deed and self-acceptance.



## Self-forgiveness

In coaching, forgiveness (absolution) and penitence come in two ways. Firstly self-forgiveness and self-acceptance are part of the physical process of coming to the coach and verbally confessing – *'It is such a relief to finally speak about this to someone; I have been hiding from myself for years.'* By the very act of turning up and speaking of their emotive lives in the session the client confesses and demonstrates contrition: *'I am being open with myself, facing myself, doing what is right.'*

The other way a coachee is forgiven is through the socially sanctioned coach accepting their account without passing a negative judgment upon them. The contemporary professional 'ear' is trained to be non-judgmental. Simply being accepted as who you are, with empathy and without negative judgment, seems to have a powerful 'soul healing' impact that triggers forgiveness. Being accepted by the coach often precedes the personal acceptance and forgiveness. Atonement may follow if the client chooses to change their behaviour, apologize to an injured party, make reparation for their deeds or indeed their neglect – *'I never told my father I loved him. I think I will write to him.'*

A skilled coach working in the domain of the Soul Guide also has an active role. They must initially create the space for the confessional (paternal and maternal containment) then take up the role as guide for the conscience. The Soul Guide is not a spiritual director as they do not speak on behalf of a greater power or try to interpret the coachee within any specific religious tradition (unless this is specifically agreed between coach and coachee who share a belief/faith system). The Soul Guide can be a very challenging role – it does not have the protective rituals, uniforms or setting of a priest/psychoanalyst, and can therefore only be undertaken when a lot of trust has been achieved. Knowing when to confront the coachee about their authenticity, duplicity or the dissonance that exists between their feelings and their speech is skilled work.

The coaching site is a new post-modern confessional, an important part of coaching that requires more attention. It is a cultural phenomenon, and produces personal growth, subjective truth, and seems to be an important part of how individuals create their selfhood and identity in today's society. The Soul Guide Coaching Discourse is the coaching space where the confessional, alongside other 'inner self' work, takes place.

## Conclusion

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The Freudian Pair enables the analyst and (client) to feel the echo of his or her being. ... It is like seeing one's soul in a particular type of mirror. (Bollas, 1997: 40)



The coaching pair can also enable the coachee to feel the echo of his or her being, to see their soul in a particular type of mirror, yet the coaching mirror is very different to the psychoanalyst's mirror. The Soul Guide 'mirror to the soul' is a more diverse mirror, bringing different reflections to the coachee. What differentiates Soul Guide Coaching from other discourses is that the Soul Guide coach does hold a mirror, moving it to different angles, to show the coachee different perspectives of themselves, whereas other discourses are more active and externally focused in their approaches.

With Soul Guide Coaching, something strange happens in this coaching space. The truth speaks itself into this space, often surprising both parties.

When training and supervising new coaches they are often surprised and can be overwhelmed at the material the coachee reveals, as one coaching supervisee put it:

... we were working on his career goals then there was a pause, and the discussion suddenly changed; Mark (the coachee) said he didn't really like his job, then he elaborated and said he detested it. He went on to say his whole life was a mess and I was dumbfounded ... he looked stunned too, and there was a tear in his eye.

A confidential coaching conversation creates a potential space for many diverse conversations; the strategic, the business, the organizational, the team, and also a confessional conversation that opens the way for Soul Guide Coaching.

### The social speaks through us

The Soul Guide coach is an unconscious carrier of culture, inheriting aspects of the social role of the shaman, doctor, priest and psychotherapist, all of whom enact and embody the Soul Guide Discourse. It has passed through many incarnations, it has morphed and changed, and the coach is the latest post-modern receptacle of this discourse. The coach is a new incarnation of the professionalized listener, the 'socially sanctioned ear'. The experienced and 'in tune' coach becomes accustomed to this soul work; they feel the stirrings of the soul and make a space for it, respecting it. They hesitate before offering a 'clever coaching question' to fill the space, to show their efficacy, instead pausing with an inner stillness that allows the coachee to reveal themselves. Coaching in the Soul Guide Discourse is to create this potential space, offer emotional containment for the coachee as they locate themselves, and to offer Soul Guidance to the coachee as they work in the space of 'becoming'.

The Soul Guide Coaching learns from what Burrell (1997) calls 'retro-organization' and draws upon the pre-modern soul healing traditions, and



acts as a bridge between the pre-modern and the post-modern. It is developing a hybrid coaching approach that delivers a post-modern confessional, a space for lightening the burden of the world and contemplative reflection – for exploring meaning, identity, emotions and experience.

It is post-modern in the sense that it draws on the therapeutic yet it is not a therapeutic intervention; it draws on religious heritage and yet is very clearly a non-religious practice; Soul Guide Coaching is a post-modern hybrid practice. Religious and therapeutic approaches impose meanings onto confessional, pastoral and psychological relationships, whereas the post-modern coach has a new freedom, and moves between approaches, whilst treating modernity's insistence on rationality, utilitarianism and scientific reductionism with disdain. The Soul Guide holds an important place on the coaching map that counters the excesses of other discourses, and places truth, personal experience and the soul as central to coaching work. It has particular resonance in today's world as it allows the self to be explored, free from the therapeutic search for the wounded self, and free from the striving to achieve goals and outputs.

## Strengths

The Soul Guide offers a unique place in coaching; it holds with the traditions of the shaman, the monk, the healer and the 'wise counsellor'. It challenges modernity's obsession with rationality, progress and order. The Soul Guide is vitally important owing to the increasingly marginalized spaces in society for such conversations and explorations to take place, free from the burdens of religious dogma or therapeutic pathologizing tendencies.

The Soul Guide opens a liminal space, pauses and hesitates, listening to the heartbeat of the conversation rather than only its content. It is the coaching space where the post-modern confessional takes place; a site that welcomes disorder, where the unconscious is liberated to speak, where the soul itself finds its voice, where desire is heard, and an individual's subjective truth is found. This is not easy work but takes courage from both parties. The Soul Guide then coaches the individual to help them live their life with more meaning, desire, generosity and authenticity. The consequences of this work can be profound, often in subtle and unexpected ways, to the coachee and to those around them.

## Challenges

The inexperienced or inauthentic Soul Guide may use the rhetoric of spirituality, soul work and the authentic self, whilst actually reproducing narcissism.



Asking a coachee about their desire does not mean working without the 'reality principle' (see Chapter 13), avoiding responsibilities in relationships, or offering unreal coaching advice such as 'You can be anything you wish to be.' Promoting narcissism and false choice is a weakness that undermines deep soul work. 'Love-ins' can take place in Soul Guide Coaching, when a collusive mutuality forms, where both parties unite against a bad external world, enjoying their time together but not doing the real soul work. Spirituality can also be used subtly and coercively to align an individual to a corporate vision in order to make the coachee more conformist and more productive.

To be a Soul Guide coach is to coach from a place of life experience, insight and maturity of spirit, and Soul Guide Coaching cannot be taught through techniques and skills training. Soul Guide Coaching requires the coach to undergo a personal formation process. Training can help develop the coach but it's a longer term and more challenging process and therefore coaching courses often omit this discourse when offering the quick-win coaching technique approaches.

## Suggested Reading

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